

Gorbachev's Game

*The Soviets Must Make Things Hard
Or Risk More Calls for Independence*

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MOSCOW, April 20 — In closing the energy tap on rebellious Lithuania, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev is struggling with a far larger sovereignty crisis than the one presented by the resilient Baltic republic.

He is also dealing with much of the disgruntled Czarist-Stalinist empire that he inherited, a polyglot swath of long-abused nationalist prides and jurisdictions that is studying his every move in Lithuania.

His tactics show that this audience is even more critical for him than the White House and his other new global allies, who are increasingly obliged to view his economic pressures through the prism of cold-war history.

For his domestic audience, the Soviet leader appears to have decided that he must either make an object lesson in impulsiveness of the Baltic republic's declaration of independence or find other pieces of the Soviet nation lining up for their own hasty versions of decentralized power and independence.

The Swell of Separatism

The veins of potential rebelliousness are running ever deeper in numerous scattered parts of this demoralized nation. The Baltic crisis is being monitored as avidly by the longtime nationalists in Georgia, the southern republic, as by the newer groups of separatists in the Ukraine, no longer such a sleeping giant on the nation's western flank.

Symptoms of a kind of de facto decentralization are increasing in the

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provinces even as Mr. Gorbachev, prodded by the Baltic crisis, hurriedly tries to pass a new, more inviting law on Soviet federalism to brace against the swell of separatism.

Lately, individual cities and even neighborhoods are caught up in local demands for exotic variations on independence. The regional governments in Lvov and in two other provinces in western Ukraine, for example, have alarmed officials with sudden declarations of independence from Soviet law.

No one is yet sure what this might mean, although Soviet flags and emblems are reportedly coming down. Storing away the Kremlin's trappings is part of the heartfelt anti-Communist iconoclasm now spreading across the union, focused on the many monuments and dogmatic clichés of Lenin the patriarch.

The center must hold, Mr. Gorbachev warns, as scorn encircles him. And while he focuses on the dramatic case of Lithuania to press that lesson, Uzbekistan, the far-less-noticed Central Asian republic, quietly announces that it will stop exporting its basic factory products, appliances and other badly needed goods to the rest of the nation until local needs are met.

For such a huge, restless and cynical national constituency, the Soviet leader seems intent on demonstrating in Lithuania the risks of small-scale sovereignty that lie just beyond the joys of

declaring independence from the Kremlin. He has ordered a demonstration of the price of independence, a price that Lithuanian nationalists have long vowed to pay after five decades of sometimes lethal servitude.

As the Soviet leader turned up the heat on Lithuania, he made gentler appeals to the other Baltic republics, Estonia and Latvia, promising some better but still vague federal relationship if they ended their own independence campaigns.

An Estonian lawmaker said Mr. Gorbachev showed his passion at this private wooing at the Kremlin by declaring: "Where are you, inside the Soviet Union or out? If you are on the outside we will not speak to you, just as we will not speak to Landsbergis and the Lithuanians." He was referring to Vytautas Landsbergis, the Lithuanian President.

For his lesson, Mr. Gorbachev has tailored the new economic penalties in Lithuania not so much in terms of the Kremlin's central authority but in terms of the other republics' economic self-interest.

He has explained the move not as a punitive crackdown but as a case of his yielding to the wishes of other republics. Those republics, he says, would rather sell products like natural gas and oil to foreign markets, earning badly needed hard currency, than sell them to the breakaway republic for cut-rate rubles.

"Other constituent republics are asking quite aptly why they should continue supplying products to Lithuania at the expense of their own needs," Mr. Gorbachev said when he announced his anti-independence ultimatum as a matter of sympathy for the other republics.

Measuring His Comments

In gradually toughening his stance as Lithuania insisted that independence was not negotiable, the Soviet leader has carefully measured his public comments in the global arena.

Mr. Gorbachev is obviously keeping in mind the approaching Washington summit meeting on May 30. But a flash of his private thinking may have been provided last week when his new press secretary, Arkady A. Maslennikov, grew visibly weary of questions about White House criticism of Mr. Gorbachev's Lithuanian strategy. He said there was no need for "lectures about morals in political behavior" from a nation "which applauds their President whenever he sends troops to Grenada to change the regime there" or to Panama "because they don't like Noriega, whatever his sins may be."

Such asperity is not part of Mr. Gorbachev's measured style in either arena. The most he has said to outside critics is that he is obliged to defend the nation's Constitution and that the Lithuanian rebellion "is strictly our internal question."

But the Lithuanian campaign to make this an external, global question has now been braced by the Kremlin's new application of economic pain. Lithuania is left clinging to the one strength it ever had in declaring independence on March 11: the moral high ground on which it notes that the Baltics were forcibly annexed 50 years ago by Stalin.

Mr. Gorbachev, while a lawyer, has taken to defending his national union like a wronged spouse fighting for the future of a discordant family. "In the event of divorce," he contends, "it is not important whether the marriage was contracted legally or not."